Water Quality Is Better Than It Was 30 Years Ago, Continued Improvements Require All of Us To Help

The Cuyahoga River in Cleveland caught fire in 1969. Why? It was so contaminated with oil, sewage and other pollutants that a spark from a train ignited an oil slick, which floated downriver just long enough to do $50,000 worth of damage to two key railroad trestles. That "burning river" served as a rallying point for the passage three years later of the Clean Water Act, a decisive blow in the war against water pollution.

While no Indiana rivers caught fire, like every other state, our rivers were polluted. Largely because of the Clean Water Act and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management's efforts, Indiana's waterways are much cleaner today than they were 30 years ago. For example, enforcement-driven activities have resulted in improved water in Northwest Indiana's Grand Calumet River, Indiana Harbor and Indiana Harbor Canal. In addition, many areas downstream of the state's communities are cleaner now than they were 30 years ago. Through the Clean Water Act, state, local and federal money became available for construction of enlarged and improved wastewater treatment plants and collections systems.

While our successes are many, the 2000 National Water Quality Inventory released by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency indicates we still have a long way to go. Nearly 40 percent of national rivers and streams, 45 percent of lakes and 51 percent of estuaries (where rivers empty into oceans) are still too polluted for swimming or fishing. In Indiana, 41 percent of the state's rivers and streams should not be used for recreation because of E. coli bacteria levels.

Those facts ought to rekindle our environmental passions and snap our heads to attention about water resource issues.

We have done a good job of slowing the flow of industrial pollution, reducing discharges by billions of pounds a year since the passage of the Clean Water Act. Now, we need to concentrate on "nonpoint" sources of pollution. These include storm water run-off from farms, city streets and other sources, such as construction activities.

The little things - a dime-sized drop of gasoline that spills onto the filling station concrete, too much fertilizer spread on a lawn or crop, a community car wash - add up to big problems for our water. These are examples of nonpoint sources, which cause the majority of water pollution problems in the United States today. Every time it rains or snows, concrete and pavement are washed clean of everything that has been spilled on them since the last precipitation. That water flows into storm sewers and from the storm sewers directly into a body of water, untreated.

Even seemingly benign nonpoint sources, such as soil, soap and lawn clippings, can create pollution. Did you realize that sediment - just ordinary soil - is the number one pollutant of waterways in Indiana? When sediment runs into waterways, light and oxygen are prevented from entering the water, making a poor habitat for fish and plants.

This can result in the methodical killing of our fish and a gradual degradation of our waterways. That can be just as devastating as an environmental disaster or a large chemical spill. Because the death is so gradual, many won't notice, until it is too late. A river, lake or stream won't catch fire to warn us about this problem.

Taking charge of water quality issues doesn't mean belonging to special interest groups or doing anything time consuming. You can save a waterway by changing your everyday habits and developing new ways to do old things. For example,

- Wash your vehicle at a car wash instead of in your driveway. All of the soap and chemicals that are washed down the driveway end up in our waterways. If you wash it at home, wash it in the grass so the soapy water seeps into the ground.
- Dispose of used oil, antifreeze, paints, cleaning agents and other household chemicals properly. Don't pour them down drains and storm sewers or on the ground.
- Clean up spilled break fluid, oil, grease and antifreeze. Don't hose them into the street where they can eventually reach local streams and lakes.
- Avoid using lawn treatments that contain phosphorous. Algae thrive on phosphorous, a nutrient found in many lawn fertilizers. When the lawn run-off flows into a river, lake or stream, the phosphorous feeds existing algae, causing it to grow rapidly. This creates a habitat that is uncomfortable for most fish that must compete with algae for oxygen.
- Use porous materials such as wooden planks or bricks for walkways and patios. Porous surfaces allow water to soak into the ground, where it is filtered through the soil.
- Use less water to preserve our supplies for the future. One example of a way we can all conserve water is to turn the faucet off while brushing our teeth.

Water sustains life, supports commerce and agriculture, and provides recreation and enjoyment. If we want our children and grandchildren to enjoy the benefits of clean water, we must individually and collectively rediscover our environmental passion. And that passion must run as deep as it did when the Clean Water Act was passed on October 18, 1972.